

Office of the President

Guidelines for Stewarding our Institutional Voice

The Western Michigan University community consists of students, faculty, staff, alumni and donors from a wide array of lived experiences from across our state and around the world. As a public university, the people of Michigan also have a stake in our core mission of providing a high-quality educational experience and advancing the public good through research and creative scholarship. Free speech and academic freedom are essential ingredients in our ability to accomplish that mission. Stewardship of free speech and academic freedom requires that the University must be vigilant in considering whether its actions intentionally or unintentionally inhibit free speech and inquiry across our community. Careful stewardship of our institutional voice is crucial in this regard as well as to ensure that when the University speaks, it is able to advance our core mission of education, research and creative scholarship.

The guidelines set forth in this document formalize and clarify our practice around issuing official statements on social, political or geopolitical matters. They are designed to ensure that the University's voice is used thoughtfully, effectively and in alignment with its core mission. A bedrock principle of that mission is to create the best conditions for the pursuit of truth and critical thinking. This principle is foundational to intellectual inquiry and discovery that creates and transfers knowledge, transforms knowledge to wisdom and enables wisdom to guide our actions.

Criteria for messaging

Issuing statements on matters external to the University is undertaken only when the matter at hand meets specific criteria that warrant a formal public response including:

Mission alignment

An official statement will only be considered if the matter directly affects the University's mission, ability to operate or the well-being of our campus community members in their roles as students, faculty or staff. The relevance of an issue will be determined in the context of our academic mission and institutional responsibilities.

Direct impact on campus community

A matter must directly impact campus community members in connection with their role at the University. While important, general societal concerns do not automatically warrant an institutional response unless the matter has a significant effect on the University community member's ability to teach, learn, conduct research or creative scholarship, or otherwise work within the institution.

Potential for tangible impact

The practice of issuing statements must be grounded in the ability to spur real change. If an official statement is unlikely to contribute meaningfully to addressing the concern, mitigating harm or lead to actionable outcomes, issuing a statement may be deemed performative and actually detract from the importance of the issue at hand. While as individuals we care deeply about many global and societal concerns, we won't issue institutional statements unless there's a clear, tangible impact on our teaching, learning, research mission or daily University life.

Avoidance of "message fatigue"

Overuse of institutional statements can lead to message fatigue, undermining the impact and perceived importance of critical

communications. Stewarding the institution's voice means ensuring that when statements are made, they carry weight and significance.

Due deliberation

Even when a matter aligns with the above criteria, the University will take time to assess the situation thoughtfully before making an official statement. Understanding of complex issues often evolves over time, and issuing an official statement prematurely may give the impression of delivering a final say on matters that remain unsettled. It's critical to ensure our responses add value and are not merely reactions in the moment without due deliberation.

Commitment to viewpoint diversity and open discourse

Western is committed to fostering a campus environment that encourages intellectual debate, freedom of inquiry and diverse perspectives. By careful stewardship of that environment, we can best pursue truth and ensure that we fulfill our mission. Official pronouncements can chill that environment, discouraging individuals from expressing divergent views and potentially limiting the pursuit of truth. As a public higher education institution, our priority is to create a space where all members of the campus community feel empowered as individuals to engage in critical discourse, even on complex and divisive topics. The University's role is to provide the forum for this discourse. Taking positions, advocating for a particular point of view or otherwise participating in the discourse itself diminishes the very environment the University seeks to create.

As we steward the institution's voice, we will use it judiciously in support of our [mission and core values](#). We also recognize that tragic and traumatic events can deeply affect members of our campus community, causing anxiety and distress. These events, as well as the imagery and rhetoric surrounding them on social media, news media and through other sources can be particularly troubling. We encourage those in need of support to access the available resources at the University, which are designed to help individuals process and cope with difficult emotions. Counseling resources,

such as [WMU Counseling Services](#) and [Uwill](#), are available to students, and the [Employee Assistance Program](#) is available for faculty and staff.

FAQ

Who decides if the University will issue an official statement?

The decision rests with the president and members of the President's Cabinet as the situation and the president deems appropriate. They will carefully consider whether an issue meets the established guidelines before issuing an official statement.

How do you define whether an issue affects a campus community member in association with their role as a student, faculty or staff member?

An issue is considered to affect a campus community member in their role at Western if it interferes with their ability to learn, teach, conduct research or creative scholarship, or work on campus. Broad societal concerns, while important to us as individuals, do not automatically warrant an institutional response.

Does this mean Western will never issue statements on social or political issues?

The University will issue a statement when an issue directly impacts our mission, operations or community members in their roles as a student, faculty or staff member. Statements will also be made if they have the potential to contribute meaningfully to the issue at hand.

What does it mean to avoid “performative” statements?

A statement may be considered “performative” when it is made primarily to advance a stance without leading to any meaningful action or change. The University aims to ensure that any official statements have a purpose beyond rhetoric. Moreover, overuse of institutional statements dilutes the impact of the institution's voice and can lead to message fatigue, where even important communications lose their impact. Thoughtful stewardship of our institutional voice ensures that when we do speak, it carries weight and significance.

Why does Western prioritize open dialogue over taking a stance on controversial issues?

As an institution of higher learning, we value intellectual debate, viewpoint diversity and freedom of inquiry. When an institution takes a strong public stance, it can inadvertently discourage open discussion and make individuals feel reluctant to express differing views—or even silence them. The University's goal is to create an environment where all perspectives can be shared and debated freely.

Can students, faculty or staff request that the University issue a statement?

Members of the campus community are welcome to share concerns with the President's Cabinet members. Decision about whether, when and how to issue an institutional statement will be made based on the stewardship guidelines and whether the issue aligns with the criteria for an official response.

Can individual divisions of the University, such as colleges, departments, programs or other units issue public statements on behalf of their areas?

Only the president, University spokespersons in the Office of Marketing and Communications or their designees have the authority to speak on behalf of the institution or issue an official statement on behalf of the University. Colleges, departments, programs and other units do not issue statements representing the institution as a whole. If a leader in a college, department, program or other unit feels a need has arisen within their area that requires a public comment on behalf of their area, they should contact the Office of Marketing and Communications (MarCom) for assistance. MarCom will coordinate with the Provost, President and other relevant cabinet members as the situation requires.

Do these guidelines impact freedom of speech afforded under the First Amendment?

No. These guidelines apply to when the University exercises its institutional voice, not to the speech of individuals. Visit the University's [Free Speech webpage](#) for more information.

Do these guidelines impact the academic freedom of WMU faculty?

No. In fact, the intent of the guidelines is to advance, not constrain academic freedom. While the leaders of the University and its colleges, departments, programs, or other units are expected to follow these Institutional Voice guidelines when speaking on behalf of the University, our community of faculty may participate in any public conversation. When doing so, they should present their statements as their own opinion and not that of WMU. Visit [Academic Freedom at Western Michigan University](#) for more information.

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